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COMMENTARY

WHY FIVE MILLION FRENCHMEN VOTE COMMUNIST

Economic Stagnation and Political Stalemate

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PARIS

LET me begin with a heresy: the mechanism of representative democracy is in rather poor working order. This is more true of Europe than of the British Commonwealth and America. But, to some extent at least, it is true generally.

In an age in which mass suggestion has been brought to a point of high technical development, the means whereby the voter's will may be influenced seem to have outstripped the ability of the average voter of the modern state clearly and calmly to examine the problems. The organization of political parties has developed faster than education for citizenship; and the individual's vote—choosing between parties rather than ideas—decides questions that were never put to him and which he has not thought about at all. The responsible act whereby a citizen delegates his mite of political sovereignty has become too frequently one of

pure irrationality. Looking closely at representative government in the West, one can only be taken aback by the frivolity of the motives which currently work to influence the voter's decision.

The most respectable of these motives remains a certain loyalty to the political forms which he may have inherited from his forefathers, and which he favors for tradition's sake. But even this steadying factor is no longer available in those countries, of which France is one, whose political fabric has been warped by war and internal upheaval. One instance of this is the way in which elections there have assumed an exaggerated role in national life. It is surely not a sign of good health for a nation such as France to be living constantly in anticipation of a next election which will throw its entire political and administrative structure into question. When democracy is converted into a continuous plebiscite, the whole activity of both the administration and the opposition will come to be dominated by one concern: winning the next election.

HERBERT LÜTHY's previous articles in this journal, "France's Homeless Left" (August 1950) and "Has Europe the Will to Fight?" (November 1950), first brought the writings of this Swiss political analyst to the English-speaking world. He offers here his interpretation of a phenomenon in French political life that many believe holds the key to the fate of that troubled Republic, and its role in the Western alliance—the persistence of a Communist core of no less than 5,000,000 votes, fundamentally undiminished in the recent elections. This article was translated by Felix Giovanelli.

By this unrelenting striving to overwhelm the voter, the very mechanism of suffrage is thrown out of gear, for it will operate ever less and less as it should in a democracy, namely, to effect a periodic change of ruling personnel. In consequence, there are parties which install themselves permanently in power and lose all their dynamism, treasuring power for power's sake, and others that install themselves in an opposition that has

lost every shred of responsibility, to a point where any means that could land them back in power will seem legitimate. The weightier a controversial issue, the greater the irresponsibility with which it is fought out. American observers view with astonishment and apprehension certain baffling European election antics: a seemingly trivial issue like that of subventions for religious schools is actually given greater weight than such a life-and-death matter as democracy versus totalitarianism. Europe views with no less astonishment and apprehension the organized excesses of American elections: the disproportion between the parochial and personal motivations with which such issues as the defense of Europe or China policy are approached and the international consequences, is hardly less great.

THE fact is that the electoral process and the party system—these sensitive and fragile mechanisms for determining the national will—are everywhere ill suited to the job of coping with the high tensions generated by the cold war; but particularly and dangerously so in France.

In countries enjoying a relatively intact social structure and a stable political organization—the Anglo-Saxon two-party system, for example—electoral struggle between democratic parties remains limited in its aims and consequences, the only effect being a momentary slowing down of the governmental machinery. But the electoral process becomes downright tragic in countries where, as a result of historical catastrophes or intolerable social tensions, a totalitarian party is a real contender for power. A voter's mandate to a radical, a socialistic, a conservative party bears an expiration date: once a legislature or parliament has run its course, he can recall it and hand it over to another party. Such indeed is the tacit presupposition underlying the whole democratic process, and it is because of it that the system's defects become bearable. But with the coming into existence of a powerful totalitarian party, this presupposition is removed at one stroke: if such a party triumphs, the voter's mandate becomes irrevocable.

Unfortunately, a totalitarian party boldly unveils its totalitarian character only after it has seized power. Up to that moment it declares its despotic nature only inferentially

and analogically, disavowing it when its opponents proclaim it, dismissing their charges as election propaganda. In the present state of political life, a totalitarian party is distinguishable from the other parties only in the unrestrainedness of its appeals to such instincts as hate, anxiety, and millennial salvationism, in the more radical character of its hostility to the status quo, in the way it freely promises all things impossible. Since, in modern mass democracies, all parties operate to a greater or lesser degree by such dubious means, its propaganda differs from that of other parties only in its total unscrupulousness. The totalitarian party need not feel restricted in any way because it is aware that once it has taken over it will not be accountable to anyone and will freely trample all opposition. It is possible for millions of citizens to lend their suffrage to such a party without being aware that, instead of making a decision to increase the parliamentary strength of this or that electoral grouping and declaring themselves on general policy, they have risked the existence of democracy on a dice throw.

The caricatural stage has been reached when each election boils down fundamentally to the question of whether a totalitarian party is going to reach the 50 per cent goal, an outcome which would end the game once for all. And a vicious circle is traced when it takes the combined strength of all democratic parties to form a bare majority, and when, consequently, the voters no longer have a choice between a democratic party or coalition in power and a democratic opposition, but a choice between the parliamentary status quo and dictatorship. In such an event, the very essence of democracy, namely, the right of opposition, has become synonymous with the right to commit suicide. The other side of the coin is that the survival of democracy gets identified with maintenance in power of the incumbent administration, and the defense of "things as they are."

SUCH has been the situation of French democracy from the time when the municipal elections of the autumn of 1947, held during the stormy onset of a general strike, showed that the democratic majority in the Chamber no longer enjoyed the support of the majority of the citizenry—at least during

that moment of panic. From that time on, French political life was dominated by one obsession: the next parliamentary elections. For General de Gaulle and his "Rally of the French People," the recently concluded election campaign began four years ago with a demand for the immediate dissolution of the Chamber and new elections of deputies. In contrast, all the ingenuity of the successive ministerial combinations was concentrated upon the job of delaying such elections as long as possible, until conditions got back to "normal" and until the all-too-indefatigable Gaullists ran out of election gas. Events show that this goal was to some extent realized: in its last eight months of existence the Chamber managed to devise an electoral engine whereby the parties of the center might keep themselves afloat at the expense of the Gaullist and Communist oppositions. But the difficulties encountered in welding a governing coalition from different groups with conflicting electoral interests were so great that no time was left over for other tasks, such as controlling or softening the impact on the French people of the consequences of the Korean war, international rearmament, and material shortages. There was not even time to approve a budget, to say nothing of all the measures urgently necessary to carry out long-promised and long-deferred reforms of the fiscal system, the bureaucracy, and the national defense establishment. In effect, France was administered but no longer governed.

The electoral system which was finally hammered out was such a complicated monstrosity that the international press soon gave up the attempt to explain it to its readers and consoled itself with the thought that even in France nobody really understood it. That is not quite true. The French voters understood very thoroughly—the Communists and Gaullists lost no time explaining it at copious length—that this whole engine had been rigged up in order to enable the government parties and their conservative reinforcements on the right to hang on to the tiller no matter how the votes were totted up.

It is not very sensible to engage in abstract discussions of the fairness or unfairness of methods of determining electoral representation. There is no such thing as an electoral system whereby a legislative body would reflect with mathematical exactitude

the public opinion of the moment. And even if such a system were available, it might well be avoided like the plague. For it is not the object of an election to trace a fever chart of opinion—that can be left to Gallup polls—but to make possible the emergence of a working majority, capable of governing, from the whole multifarious din of contradictory and unclear voices. The British electoral system is no doubt one of the "unfair-est" in the world, but it is one of the few that really works, reflecting basic changes in the national will without disrupting the continuity of government.

In France it has been traditional practice for many decades to forge, for each new election, new election procedures of the kind that would momentarily favor the group that happened to be in power. So prefabricated elections are actually an old story. But the present governing group in France has broken all records in this respect. The reader already knows the results of the recent French elections but it may be interesting to show what the complexion of the new Chamber would have been had the representational system of the last election (1946) been retained. It is not being implied here that the older system, which tended to give a kind of monopoly to mass parties, was fairer. But a comparison of the results which would have been forthcoming according to the older method will show clearly in what measure the recent elections were "loaded" by electoral sleight of hand:

	1946		1951		
	% of vote	Seats	% of vote	Seats present system	Seats 1946 system
Communists	28.6	182	26.5	103	181
Socialists	17.9	101	14.5	104	86
Popular					
Republicans	26.4	164	12.3	85	57
Radicals	12.4	69	11.5	94	60
Independent					
Conservatives	12.8	101	13.1	121	97
Gaullists	(1.6)*(24)*		21.7	118	144

It is clear that a continuance of the 1946 electoral system would have reduced the number of seats of the democratic and parlia-

*The vote is that of the small Gaullist Union, before the existence of the Rally of the French People; the Union ran candidates in only a few of France's departments. By 1951, a Gaullist fraction of 24 deputies had emerged at the expense of the Popular Republican and Radical parties.

mentary parties (from socialistic to conservative) to 300 out of a total of 625, a condition which would have made any ministerial coalition excluding de Gaulle impossible. As it is, the middle-of-the-road parties have managed to procure 403 out of 625, a narrow but workable majority. The electoral reform "worked," but it remains a good example of how parliamentary democracy, once it is maneuvered into a position of having to fight for sheer survival, may discredit itself by the means by which it hangs on to life. This "tricked-up" election will henceforth serve as a big talking point for Communist propaganda.

THOUGH it is a gross simplification to lump the Communist and Gaullist votes together as "totalitarian," it was clear from the very outset that the Gaullist movement was anti-parliamentary; and there is no doubt that a combined Communist-Gaullist majority would have meant the end of the present parliamentary system. It remains a completely open question as to what the future development of Gaullism will be, now that its frontal assault on the seats of power has been repulsed and it has entered the Chamber merely as one of the strongest of a number of parties.

The Gaullist swell of 1947 was a panicky reaction to the Communist general strike. As soon as the Communist threat appeared less menacing, the French middle class started to move out of the emergency-born party and return to its traditional conservative groupings. In Paris, where during the general strike the belligerent mood of the citizenry had given de Gaulle an absolute majority in 1947, his voting strength now fell from 658,000 to 315,000. The decline is reflected most significantly in the wealthier and more influential quarters of the city; in the second electoral district, which comprises the main business section, de Gaulle's vote has declined from 62.5 per cent to 24 per cent. Gaullism has become a party of "little men" who are not far from being as disgruntled as the Communist voters, and who expect from de Gaulle, not a defense of the status quo, but a radical transformation of French life. How this internal change in the party will influence the future political attitude of its leadership remains to be seen.

The ebb of the Gaullist tide shows above

all that the majority of non-Communist French, and in particular the French bourgeoisie, now regard the existence of a huge Communist party which can rally one fourth of the electorate around itself as a permanent, well-nigh normal fact of French political life, for which no emergency measures are needed.

In virtue of its removal from most national and provincial governmental posts, the collapse of its mass strike movements and sabotage policies, and the alertness of the police, the Communist party has lost much of its capacity to act. The small decline in the percentage of votes it garnered is far from reflecting the full extent of the fall in the Communists' potential. That decline is owing for the most part to their loss of influence in many deeply conservative rural districts, where their election success of 1946 was based upon mystification and the prestige they then enjoyed as the great Resistance party. Far more significant and, from the Communist viewpoint, more disquieting, was the loss of votes in certain industrial areas, especially in the great industrial basin of Paris where the decline amounted to 10 per cent or more in various Communist strongholds. This was true even in Maurice Thorez's home district where, moreover, 1,500 Communist voters crossed the name of the Communist chief, away in Russia, off their ballots.

The decline shows that the Communist influence pervading working-class circles is not unshakeable, and is primarily owing to the absence of any real competition from other parties for the working-class vote. For these votes lost by the Communist party were not picked up by other parties, neither by the Socialists nor by any of the numerous Trotskyite, Titoist, or "neutralist" splinter groups. Apart from individual instances not reflected by the election statistics, these lost Communist votes disappeared for the most part into the mass of those who had no stomach for the "whole election bluff." The ex-Communist voters stayed home. The Communist party declined in influence, but no other fell heir to that influence, and the party apostates chose the way of silent resignation. As a consequence, the monolith of the Communist electorate did not crumble; 5,000,000 Frenchmen still voted Communist in 1951.

"TRY as I may to meditate, interpret, and understand, I cannot grasp how it is possible that over 5,000,000 Frenchmen—they *are* Frenchmen, after all—could vote Communist, that is, for a party which does not for a moment seek to conceal the fact that it is a foreign party." So wrote the noted French sociologist André Siegfried in *Le Figaro* after the recent election. And, after setting forth a number of facts widely known since 1946, which should have enlightened French peasants, workingmen, and intellectuals as to the real character of this party, he went on: "How is it conceivable that, in the face of all these warnings, these naive souls should, nonetheless, have voted Communist, that is, given a political mandate to representatives who, in Léon Blum's words, are not internationalists, but Russian nationalists in France? Foreigners look to us for an explanation and I must confess that I am at a loss to offer one."

When the question is put that way, there can be no answer forthcoming. Underlying it is the assumption that 5,000,000 Frenchmen reached a decision on June 17, 1951 to vote for the Communist party. Actually, the question should run: What could have induced these five million, who had voted Communist up to that time, to switch their votes to another party?

This may sound sophisticated but the direction that the law of political inertia takes is not an indifferent matter. The Communists are more than a party like other parties, which swing into action at election time and in the interim at best put out a newspaper. The party is an organization which keeps after its adherents tirelessly and never lets go of them for a moment. Today, for instance, there is a Communist literature in France which takes care of every reading need of its public, from novels and poems to cookbooks and farmers' almanacs. Outside of the Communist sphere of influence, nobody reads this body of literature; inside it, nobody reads anything else. The meditation to which André Siegfried is moved should perhaps begin with the thought that of the 5,000,000 Frenchmen who vote Communist, there are hardly half a dozen who read *Le Figaro* and have knowledge of its revelations about the Soviet Union and the "Peoples' Democracies."

A mass movement like the Communist

party, with its trade union affiliates and its cultural, athletic, and social auxiliaries, survives far more because of its organization than the cogency of its arguments. Belonging to it is tying oneself in an utterly different way from merely deciding periodically to vote for a socialist or radical party. And it is to no avail to point out to its adherents that this party, to which almost the whole French working class gives allegiance and which can boast of having among its members a French elite of artists and scientists, is not a French party. It has in fact become a permanent element of the structure of French society.

Exposés of forced labor and concentration camps in Communist countries can shake a French intellectual. But for a workingman whose spiritual nourishment is derived exclusively from Communist literature and oratory, they are just bogey tales which he cannot verify and which he is prompt to dismiss simply as anti-Communist propaganda. Such exposés not only fly in the face of everything he knows or thinks he knows but are so incompatible with the image of the world he carries in his head that he simply refuses to believe them. And if he knocks up against them once too often and begins to get uneasy, he will turn for advice to a comrade "versed in theory" who naturally has a ready answer at hand: what the bourgeoisie call forced labor is nothing but the practical application of the slogan, "He who does not work shall not eat"; what's wrong if in the Peoples' Democracies, where nobody can live by the sweat of others' brows, the bourgeois do-nothings must also break stones!

An argument or an isolated fact tends to be absorbed to the extent that it fits into an already existing image of the world. The execution of Willie McGee did more to confirm the French worker's belief that human rights were being trampled on in the United States than David Rousset's trial testimony on the Russian concentration camps did to shake his conviction that the Soviet Union is the land of social justice. One must have talked with such well-meaning, honest fellows in order to appreciate the hopeless inefficacy of mere argument.

AND so we are back in our vicious circle: the Communists are so strong because

they are so strong. But one could put André Siegfried's query differently and rather more pointedly: Why is it morally and almost physically impossible for the French workman—taking him as the "typical" Communist adherent, though quite different social categories are also in the party following—to vote for a party other than the Communist? The answer is readily forthcoming: The Communist voter has no other way of registering his demand for change except to go to the other extreme and plump for de Gaulle—a leap which many accomplished in the extraordinarily critical situation in the autumn of 1947, but which under normal circumstances is too great. All the other parties stand in defense of the status quo, even if against their will, as in the case of the Socialists. And the blunt, key fact is that *this status quo is morally intolerable or physically unbearable for millions of Frenchmen, for whom it means stagnation and atrophy.*

The word "stagnation" may ring strangely as a description of the present situation in France. For has not France amazed the world by the energy of its reconstruction, its speedy repair of the damage done by war and occupation?

First of all, one must focus a jaundiced eye on statistics. This year France has outstripped the record for production it set in 1929. But the plain fact is that even at record height, France's production is virtually at the same level as was reached in 1913, augmented by the Lorraine steel industry which was acquired as a result of the First World War and by the growth of the new electrical and automotive industries. From 1900 to 1913 French production increased by one-third. Since then it has managed, after repeated collapses brought on by wars and economic crises, to climb back up to the same level, only to stagnate there.

All the victory bulletins of the Finance Ministry and of the Monnet Plan are glad tidings for those newspaper readers who find the going tolerable. But for the French wage earner, they are a standing provocation. He hears that France has reached its best pre-war standard and he even believes it when he sees the well-stocked shops. But he is far more aware of another set of official statistics, which tell him that the average French salary has gone up only twelvefold

since 1938 while the cost of living has increased twenty-three-fold. This salary keeps body and soul together, that is, he has enough to eat; but shoes have become a luxury which he can scarcely afford. Housing? In Paris alone, 35,000 families of three, four, or more persons live in a four-walled space, in single hotel rooms, or in some sublet maid's room under the eaves. Yet not a house in Paris was destroyed by the war! Every year, in Paris and France, more houses collapse out of old age and dilapidation than are rebuilt; meanwhile the population is growing. If there is no radical change, Paris will be a city of ruins in twenty years.

In short, though the economy is at full employment and maximum productivity, the economic product of this full employment economy seems in some mysterious way to be volatilized before ever reaching the consumer and without doing any visible good to the country. What else can the French worker assume than that an evil confederacy, which he calls "capitalism," is skimming off the wealth of the nation and stealthily gobbling it up?

TO BE sure, such a judgment is a demagogic oversimplification. But it is far from being entirely false. For forty years now, the wealth produced by the French economy has been reinvested in it in ever diminishing quantities. It has been shunted abroad, hoarded in gold bars—in some way, in any way, "made safe" against war, revolution, and the tax collector. The French economy has been a cask drained but never replenished, a cow milked but never turned out to graze. Through the last pre-war decade the French economy went downhill at full tilt. Its continuous waste of substance was masked only by income from pre-1914 foreign investments, by the accumulated yield of inherited business and real estate holdings and by creeping inflation. And now, after World War II, more than ever before, it seems to the average French capitalist or peasant the clever thing to do to invest his wealth overseas, or to bury it in strongboxes in his garden.

It is a gross and dangerous error to suppose that the trouble lies with a handful of "big capitalists"—the "trusts" or "200 families." Were this the case, the solution would

be simple—just as in Italy land reform would be a simple matter if only a couple of dozen big landowners, and not a whole swarm of bourgeois property owners of all the little and big towns of Italy, stood in the way. Actually it is a large sector of the French population that is busy skimming the cream.

French society is not divisible into two halves, big business and the individual toiler, as left-wing simplicists would have us believe, but is divided, in practically equal parts, into (1) farmers, (2) salaried men of all categories including cabinet ministers, and (3) people "engaged in business," of which last the vast majority are of course not producers but middlemen. The first and third categories thrive on scarcity and inflation, the second is squeezed between the two—from the workingmen up to the highest professional and governmental employees all in the second group have been carrying the burden since the end of the war. The prevailing policies of low wages and high prices, rapid turnover and exorbitant profits, work in the last analysis at their expense. The entire welfare policy of the Fourth Republic has consisted exclusively of leveling wages and salaries within the second category to provide relief and other social services to those on a marginal subsistence; taxes on the wage earner carry a hugely disproportionate share of this load. The natural outcome is that the only career that opens up a prospect of greater well-being is buying and selling, "doing business," *faire des affaires*. To cite a single but downright fantastic figure: France can now boast of an average of one self-avowedly independent businessman or shopkeeper for every forty inhabitants.

IT IS with this kind of social structure that France has had to repair the damages of war, make good the technological time-lag of a decade, right its unfavorable trade balance, build up its defense establishment, and keep its empire intact. (This last item among the new burdens of the economy is not to be overlooked: the remote, endless war in Indo-China has in five years engulfed as much as the Marshall Plan has brought in.) The whole pyramid of fresh burdens rests, ultimately, on the shoulders of large-scale industry and the wage earners, since all other sectors of the population have continued successfully to evade their taxes.

Taxable commercial income, when calculated in terms of stable currency, has sunk to 50 per cent of the 1938 level and the average tax receipts from each agricultural enterprise is 4,000 francs, that is, eleven dollars! France is a land without income statistics because it is a land where books are not kept: only employees on fixed salaries and corporations owning modern heavy industries are unable to hide their income from the government. What the income tax does not yield is brought in by a cascade of indirect taxes which are absorbed in higher prices, and hence are passed on to consumers. The result has already been indicated: wage index: 12; cost of living index: 23.

These two shocking figures need some explanation. Has the average real wage, which was already abnormally low before World War II really been halved since 1938? Yes, if you consider the actual money handed over as wages, apart from all extras. No, if all social security benefits—free kindergartens, old-age pensions, sick and hospital insurance, etc.—are reckoned as "indirect wages" or "social remuneration." "Social remuneration" now makes up 45 per cent of the total wage budget. Anyone who has tried to find his way in French wage and salary statistics knows what a state of hopeless confusion has been created by this new concept. The simple question as to what the average French industrial worker really earns has become utterly unanswerable. One grim estimate is that, in relation to 1938, the nation's sum total of direct and "indirect" wages has declined 5-10 per cent while the labor force is somewhat greater and the number of working hours has gone up sharply.

Social security was the great achievement of the French postwar period. It had become an urgent necessity for two reasons. First, a dole—it was no more than that—had to be handed out to ease the harrowing burdens of the aged, who had been robbed of all their savings by war and inflation; and, second, the steady decline of the birth rate had to be arrested by subsidizing young families—for even in this latter respect, France had to make good the material loss of substance of the happy-go-lucky Third Republic. As a consequence of the falling birth rate of the period between wars, the number of Frenchmen of employable age

will have fallen from 23,000,000 in 1945 to 21,000,000 in 1965, while the number of over-age will have gone up, concurrently, from 7,000,000 to 9,000,000. Had the rate of population growth of the pre-war period been allowed to continue, the active working population would have sunk to 17,500,000 by 1985, while the number of aged would have remained stabilized at about 9,000,000—a perfect picture of an over-aged, permanently impoverished, no longer viable country.

The steady upswing of the birth rate since the end of the war is in the long run the most hopeful element in the French postwar situation: France is becoming a nation of young people again. But for the next ten to fifteen years, until this new postwar generation has become of employable age, an additional burden will have been imposed. In this transition period, while the employables of the previous generation gradually drop out of active life, the number of aged and children at both ends of the age pyramid will be increasing out of all proportion to the ability of this diminished between-wars generation to maintain them. Social security has, in effect, meant a new distribution of the fixed national pool of wages and salaries for the benefit of the old, the sick, large families, and the most unskilled wage earners—at the expense of the young, the childless, and of the better qualified workers and employees. All other groups of the population have successfully withheld their contribution to this national program.

Why have 5,000,000 Frenchmen voted Communist? That's why.

LET us consider the most striking, the most extreme, the most significant example of the vicious circle of French stagnation: the atrophy of the building industry. A short-sighted social policy has kept rents frozen since the devaluation of the franc that followed World War I. The result was a disproportion between rent receipts and building costs so great as to act as a brake upon all reinvestment in housing. Except for a brief interruption around 1930, building construction in France gradually dwindled through the last thirty years to a vanishing point. The result has been complete chaos. Young families can find no living quarters, and the roofs collapse over the heads of the

dwellers in working-class quarters, which have long since become slum areas. Meanwhile a vast number of roomy houses stand empty, or at most are occupied a few weeks in the year, by owners who spend most of their time on the Côte d'Azur—it is no expense to them, practically, to keep up their superfluous houses.

The Communist solution is, or seems, easy: first, requisition of the homes of "the rich," second, building houses by forced labor—and hang the costs. It is hard to exaggerate the propagandistic impact of this program, even though many who own these empty, roomy houses are not rich at all but are just lucky, elderly people who have held on to them for decades. The Gaullists make a similar appeal: if the forces of liberty are derelict, if the enterprisers no longer act, if the capitalists no longer invest, and if the most urgent tasks of the nation remain undone, then only dictatorship and compulsion remain. This prospect has nothing shocking about it for millions of Frenchmen.

The liberal solution is to make rents adequate to building costs. But the legislators of the Fourth Republic are reluctant to strike out in this direction. The French standard of living is so low that it simply will not stand up under the added burden of a rise in rent. However, the alternative to the equation higher building costs equal higher rents has been notably ignored—namely, the lowering of building costs.

The French Minister of Reconstruction, Claudius Petit, was not exaggerating when he declared that building construction in France is still carried on according to the best Merovingian methods. The lowering of costs is not simply a matter of technical means; there are bulldozers and power cranes in France today, but at best they serve only to raise building costs. On the other hand, countless experiments have shown that without any technical revolution, but merely by a rationalized application of labor power, building costs can be reduced by one-half. But the rational organization of building labor is incompatible with the present form of guild organization of the French building industry, which sees to it that even the smallest house-construction contract is shared out among a dozen different sub-contractors who are completely independent of one another and send in their workmen at their

own sweet pleasure, perhaps one in February, another in September. In the present condition of the building industry, none of the interested parties, neither the architect, nor the plumber, has the slightest interest in a rational reorganization of it.

In thirty years of minimal activity the French building industry has come completely to stand on the principle of the greatest profit for the smallest turnover (and profit is reckoned on the basis of a percentage added to costs, whatever they might be!). This attitude has become almost an instinct. The mighty guild of French architects—"Le Conseil de l'Ordre" they call themselves in the best medieval style—and the well-organized public-works contractors see to it that no outsider will take it upon himself to submit lower cost estimates; they must remain high enough to assure a satisfactory livelihood to a contractor with one roof-repair job and two pipe-laying contracts a year. In this land where the need for new housing cries to high heaven, there is chronic unemployment among construction workers. The result is that the building trades unions have banded together—in order to obstruct the inflow of Italian construction workers, who are the finest builders in Europe.

The French economy is so completely sunk in what has become habitual stagnation that, though everyone naturally complains about it, in each concrete instance the phalanx of all interested parties closes ranks in order to protect their "*situations acquises*" against all competition. The housing problem is an admittedly extreme example, but it does furnish us with an excellent guiding thread through the labyrinth of the French economic and social structure. One could explore almost any of its sectors, from the sugar beet industry to the colonial administration and emerge with, if not an identical, at least a similar conclusion: a vicious circle of stagnation, endless and self-perpetuating. This cliquish, ossified economy—which, by means of arbitrary price schedules and conspiratorial price agreements, has internally stifled free competition, free prices, and cost accounting, and which defends itself externally by tariff walls and import quotas—has two ways out available to it, both of them revolutionary: Communism or capitalism—a dictatorship using forced labor or modern rationalized competitive enterprise

on the American pattern. But the French workingman knows nothing about the second alternative, being sincerely convinced that what he now has is "capitalism" and that he wants something else.

THE impression ought not to be left that there is no awareness of the problem in France. The retooling and modernization of French industry was the watchword of all French parties and politicians at the war's end. Three-fourths of the deputies of the recent Chamber had subscribed to the program of the National Resistance Council, which proclaimed the goal of modernization. The Chamber also unanimously approved the Monnet Plan, that comprehensive inventory of the needs and potentialities of French industry, a liberal planning document unique in the quality of its daring. The Monnet Plan attracted a veritable host of apostles of productivity who made clear to a great number of Frenchmen the relation between production and a high standard of living, and diffused a kind of technocratic enthusiasm.

But the Monnet Plan has, since 1947, fallen a sacrifice to the general movement of "return to the Third Republic." Its credit allocations were the first thing to be axed by the budget balancers, its technocratic team was put under the authority of the Finance Ministry and the Bank of France, which, in the spirit of classical financial orthodoxy, have not seen the cure for inflation in higher production and industrial expansion but in credit contraction and lowered consumption. By its stress on a balanced budget and balanced foreign trade, the Marshall Plan has unwittingly strengthened this retrograde tendency. It was not only rabid Communist propaganda that damaged its popularity: the Marshall Plan appeared to seal the victory of the bankers over the technicians.

IN THIS attempt to explain "why 5,000,000 Frenchmen vote Communist," the darker aspect of the picture has obviously been emphasized. It is not an entirely true likeness. The Monnet Plan, the Marshall Plan, and all the heroic straining of the postwar period have not been entirely without result. The French social structure has not been shaken up, but decisive sectors of French industry have been enabled to expand their

capital and retool. The steel and automotive industries have reached a production level that will stand favorable comparison with any. The electrification of the country proceeds with giant strides; in the Rhone Valley a project is under way which can, without exaggeration, be called a French counterpart of the Tennessee Valley Administration. Since the election—and perhaps in part because of its sobering effects—there have been signs of a more determined effort to increase productivity. ECA now plans to give aid directly to individual pilot enterprises which agree to a program of more productive methods, and the participation of workers in management and profits. This should do something to temper the universal and just criticism that American recovery funds have not reached the French working class. Progressive French industrialists have begun working along the same lines on their own. Even French agriculture, once so deeply sunk in medieval apathy, is slowly beginning to shake a leg.

All this will have its effect on the spirit and structure of the French economy "in the long run." Just as, "in the long run," namely, about 1965, the new upswing of the French birth rate will decisively affect the totality of national life. There are processes at work here that cannot be hurried. But advantages promised "in the long run" are so much gray theorizing to the mass of the population. They will answer what a good citizen once answered after a professor of economics got through unfolding a long-range program: "But in the long run we'll all be dead!" Nine million Gaullist and Communist votes are the expression of this understandable feeling of impatience.

IS THERE really nothing to be done in the short run? Yes, there is a way to hasten the end of stagnation. In this battle between the forces of inertia and renewal, a push from

the outside could in fact tip the scales. Several years ago, in a Chamber debate, Paul Reynaud hit the mark with the spirited statement: "We need German competition in order to rouse French enterprise from its slumbers." The Schuman Plan is the first dose of this prescription, and its implications are even more far-reaching than its immediate technical significance. The dynamiting of the protectionist armor within which French enterprise—like all European enterprise, but more so than any other—is molding away is the real revolution that France needs. Every step taken in the direction of a genuine European confederation—and not just "working side by side" as has been announced—means more than a pooling of available energies. It means the awakening of all the energies of Europe which are now latent.

It was inevitable that the vested economic interests should barricade themselves against this needed revolution. Leagued with them is all the lumber of outmoded life-styles, even of that "French way of life" which, for example, is reflected in the charming manner with which Frenchmen use the word "*petit*"—even when a "*petit voleur*" or a "*petit fraudeur*" is being referred to—and in the love of handicraft production and individual workmanship which would like to think of the whole economy as a manifestation of the aesthetic spirit. In short, there is a whole tradition that instinctively resists "German [or American] efficiency," a tradition which streams of visitors pour into France to admire. It is true that efficiency and mass production are not the highest of human goals. But it has become an indispensable condition for sheer national survival in this dangerous and dynamic world. Only when it has emerged from its sea of stagnation can French democracy permit itself the luxury of "muddling through" in its own quaint, delightful way.